Cappelen Damm Agency *Spring 2020*

The Body is a Murderer

We can't put it off any longer, I tell Nina. What can't we put off, Nina replies. We have to start trying for a baby, I say. Soon I'll be too old; I'll be too tied up in varicose veins to make a baby with my body. I'm getting older, I say. Nina looks at me. My eyes are glossy because of my heart.

Nina and Kitty are married and live an active life in Oslo, with careers and good friends. If they want to have a child, the time to start is now. It'll take more to make it happen than a romantic evening or two. They have to make a choice themselves if anything is going to happen. And life is so good just the way it is. They start to click around on a donor website, just to take a look.

What does trying to have a child entail? Will it corrode their relationship? Is Kitty's body even capable of bearing a child? And why does the thought of new life make Kitty think of death?

The Body Is a Murderer is a complex love story about Nina and Kitty; an urgent and intimate examination of the life we have and the life we make.

foreignrights@cappelendamm.no
www.cappelendammagaency.no

The Body is a Murderer
Kitty Byng

Sample translation by Marjam Idriss.

Kitty Byng
[b. 1982]

Kitty Byng lives in Oslo, where she works as a psychologist and with next of kin to prison inmates. In 2014, she started her private practice tailored to the needs of university students, after having written several articles about students' mental health.
The Body is a Murderer is her first novel.

Sample translation: “The Body is a Murderer” by Kitty Byng

3.

I’m in the bathroom, it’s Monday morning, I’ve just had a shower and as I put on lotion I notice a dark purple spot on the back of my thigh. It looks like a small lump, like the kind I can get for no particular reason and that *isn’t* anything, it’s just ugly. I rest my foot on the washbasin cabinet, hold a small mirror to the underside of my thigh and realise that it’s actually several tiny veins. A small, dense web of microscopic veins.

I visit my doctor and ask what it is. She’s in her fifties, blonde, fit, alert like a border collie, and from the rich part of Oslo.
That’s just blood that’s pooled in the veins, the doctor says, and puts down her magnifying glass. Nothing to worry about. Is there some way to avoid it? Would it help to exercise, maybe raise my blood circulation? I ask. No, the doctor laughs. Ha, ha, ha! That’s a good one. It has nothing to do with that. It’s just what happens with age. Blood pools in the veins, and then it stays there. You can remove it cosmetically at a private clinic, if you really want to, the doctor says.
I do want to get rid of it, but I can’t be bothered to go to a clinic.
Instead I give the purple spot an extra scrub in the shower with my exfoliating glove. When I put on lotion, I rub the spot a little harder too. I’m trying to rub the spot out, use CPR to resuscitate it, but it’s long dead. A bit of my thigh, a part of my body, is dead.

We can’t put it off any longer, I tell Nina. What can’t we put off, Nina replies. We have to start trying for a baby, I say. Soon I’ll be too old; I’ll be too tied up in varicose veins to make a baby with my body. I’m getting older, I say. Nina looks at me. My eyes are glossy because of my heart. But you’re not making a baby with your veins, babe, Nina says. No, but if that’s how the veins in my thighs are doing, imagine what my internal organs must look like, I say. And it’s about mum too. I don’t want to wait so long that she can’t be a part of our child’s life, I say.

Nina and I have always talked about having children. I mean, that we both want to have them at some point, not that we’ve *always* been talking about it, as in constantly. We talked about it right at the start, and it formed part of the foundation of our relationship. Nina asked me at breakfast after our first night together, if I wanted children in my life. She didn’t want to waste her time. She was sick of dating hippies who wanted open relationships and zero commitment. Do you want children, Nina asked. Yes, I want children at some point, I said, and looked at Nina, sat in the morning sun on her balcony, a piece of toast with cheese and coriander on her lap. Do you? I asked.
But it was more hypothetical back then.
I was 29. It was still ahead of me. It had always been ahead of me. Everything had always been ahead of me, really.

4.

I was living in Copenhagen when I met Nina for the first time. I had short cropped, platinum blonde hair because I wanted to be taken seriously as a lesbian. I smoked more than ever, sometimes four a day, forty on the weekends. I wore hoodies under a black leather jacket most of the time. My friends and I went to gigs and to brown pubs, to gallery openings, French movie screenings and to the Christiania Jazz club. I had left my grown-up job because I wanted to do something different. I wanted to write, and work in a café. Preferably this place called Lesbian Coffee, in Copenhagen. A week before I met Nina I had spoken to the manager there about doing a couple of trial shifts. You know what our image is here, right? She asked me in Danish.

After that I went to Norway for my summer holiday, and met Nina through my best friend Victoria. Nina had lived in the Peruvian jungle for a long stretch, she told me, at night she'd have rats crawling across the roof of her rickety shack. Two days later Nina threw a party at her house in Grønland. I sat on a folding chair in the living room, talking to someone, a gin and tonic in my hand, and watched Nina teach a dance called Cumbia to some guy who was clearly into her. She was standing behind him, her hand around his wrist, doing the movement with him. Nina doesn't normally dance. Most of the time she'd rather sit and talk immigration politics and racism, interspersed by cigarette breaks. But she taught this guy to dance the Cumbia, and I wished I was him.

Later that night Nina bought me a shot of Jäger, and as we sat outside the bar having a cigarette, I leant towards her and she kissed me. We went back to hers. When we finally got to sleep that night, I asked: Do you want me to tickle your back until you fall asleep? I had brought out the big guns, and fired. Nina smiled blissfully and said: God, yes.

That was august 2012, and we've been together ever since.

The first time Nina visited me in Copenhagen we lay in bed in my house-share and talked about sperm donors. I had recently written a think piece about sperm donor information in the Weekend newspaper. Nina had her arm raised at the sun shining through my fourth floor window. I was on my side, my head on the pillow, my fingers stroking her hand, arm, her chest and waist. It's true, I laughed, they tell you the donor's penis length. I don't believe it, Nina said and laughed. She looked up the Stork Clinic website, a private fertility clinic in Copenhagen. You don't have to check, I'm telling you, I laughed. Oh! Nina exclaimed as she opened the page, they're having an information meeting. Should we go? She said, a mad glint in her eyes. Go? I asked in disbelief. Yeah, it'd be cool to find out a bit more about how it actually works, says Nina. Wouldn't it be kind of embarrassing to go when we've only known each other for two weeks? No, because we won't tell them, Nina said.
We agreed that if it was mentioned, we'd say we'd been together for five years. This was really not believable at all. I sat through the clinic information meeting with a love bite on my neck, next to two lesbian couples who probably *had* been together for five years, none of them with love bites on their necks, as well as a few single women. We sat around a big conference table and were served coffee, tea and water.

Thank you cards with pictures of babies that had come into this world thanks to the Stork Clinic hung in the lobby outside the conference room. It had comfortable arm chairs too, with colourful pillows and a notice board where happy mothers advertised leftover sperm. They had conceived faster than expected, and had more sperm than necessary. *Three tubes of donor "Lente" for sale. Donor is 178 cm*

tall, weighs 79 kg and is a certified carpenter. Get in touch! Tabs with the woman's email address had been cut into the flyer so that you could tear one off to take with you.
Inside the conference room two clinic employees talked about the child making process. Nina and I held hands under the table and I only really remember one thing about what they said: You should talk to the child about where they came from, right from the start, because the child will be curious about that. They should hear stories about how they were made. The clinic had books available for purchase that you could read to the child. The books talked about sperm cells and about what a donor is: a donor is *not* a dad. This was essential to communicate to the child. You don't have a dad out there somewhere in the universe. But you do have a donor somewhere, which is partly where you came from, and when you're 18 you can find out who he is, if that's something you'd like to do. *Parents* are something else. Parents are the people who love you and look after you.

We laughed intoxicated as we left the clinic. We'd faked a long term relationship, and that was exciting. We'd played house. Then we shook it off and went to the pub.

I remembering feeling like Nina was almost too good to be true. By September, my heart was running over with I love you. She was so uncomplicated and unafraid. Asheghetam azizam, Nina said. When Nina was at mine in Copenhagen that autumn, we sat, in love and hands intertwined, playing chess at Bobi Bar. We drank small bottles of beer and chain smoked Manitou reds. I tapped my cigarette on the metal ashtray and studied the chess board with furrowed brows and cheeky eyes, took a drag from my cigarette and moved the bishop. Your move, I said and looked up at Nina through the cigarette smoke. She proposed for the first time after two months. I laughed, said no and told her she was crazy. And anyway, it was after sex, so it doesn't count. It was just a joke, she said later, but she obviously had to say that.

I was almost as scared as I was in love that autumn. Nina had wedged herself into my heart, and I sensed how hollow it would be if she left. She could find out something about me that she didn't like, and disappear.
Nina proposed again a few months later. I didn't understand how she could be so sure. How do you know that you want to be with me for the rest of your life, I said. What do you actually know about me. What do I know about you?
Not enough. Not everything.
I just know, Nina said. This is the best relationship I've ever had. You don't know that yet, I said, I can be a bitch sometimes. Defeatist and gloomy too, I thought, but I didn't say that. Nina grinned. It'll be fine, she said, I don't think you can be *that* bitchy.

My heart ran over again, and then again, and then again. I shut both eyes, and jumped.

I left the town I loved, my house share, the friends I used to drink beer with, sitting on floating piers on the canal and bumming smokes off passers-by. I brought my leather jacket with me to Oslo, but I didn't wear it for long. I grew my hair out.

Change doesn't always start with a cocoon and end with a butterfly. Sometimes you're a butterfly first, and then become a cocoon. Wrap yourself up, silk thread by silk thread, into a smaller, tighter, warmer, safer life, and you do it voluntarily and intentionally. Flapping around being colourful gets exhausting after a while.

5.

Two years, is what Nina said. When we got together, she said she wanted to start thinking about having children in two years. She rented a room in someone else's apartment and in that room she had a bed and something that resembled the carcass of a closet, clothes spilling out and down on the floor. When I had a shower at hers and asked for a towel, she would give me a sarong. Right, of course, I thought, as the wet sarong clung to my body, who needs towels. That's not important. But Nina was very firm when it came to having children. Two years seemed like forever at the time, so that sounds good, I said. Whatever.

Then when two years had passed, it was way too soon. Nina agreed. We were hosting pre-drinks at ours that weekend. On Wednesday we were going out for pints with a few friends. The weekend after we had a cabin trip planned. Late Sunday morning we were gonna read the newspaper. I still wasn't sure if I wanted to work as a therapist again. I preferred writing articles for small change. Nina didn't know what she wanted to be. She was becoming something. We had begun planning the huge party that was to be our wedding. We wanted to go places. We wrote a long list that I keep in my wallet to this day, it'll be there forever, full of eternally unchecked items. *The Trans-Siberian Railway,* it says. And *Kashmir.*

So we postponed the baby. At the time we looked after my nephews a lot and this was a very effective form of contraception. They are really cute; it's not that, it's just that everything else in your life immediately stops. From the moment those children come rolling through the door in their stroller, you're in survival mode.
And they cry a lot too.
They cry in the middle of the night, or just when you're super exhausted, and if you're looking after children, you get exhausted pretty quick. Especially if they cry. If I can't comfort a crying baby within two minutes, desperation hits.

I looked after one of my nephews every Tuesday, from when he was one to one and a half years old. He was dropped off at eight thirty, and by the time he was picked up at four I was beat. I couldn't do anything for the rest of the night, except lie on the couch or maybe crawl out of the apartment in Grønland, later Vålerenga, to grab a pint. I used to push him around in his stroller. The whole day consisted of pushing the stroller and passing the time, preferably *without* crying. I mostly remember the nice moments now: my nephew babbling at me as I make sandwiches with liver spread, his intonation grown-up. He watches me and picks up little trinkets that Nina and I have displayed on the turquoise shelf in the kitchen, a pen, a humming top, a sketch book, some dice. I respond to his babbling. His tone usually rises towards the end, so I interpret this as a question. I answer things like: Yes, that's a pen, you use that to write. I'm basically just inventing a conversation.
Aside from babbling, he could say 'food' and this was helpful to me. I at least knew *something* he wanted then. After a while he also learned the alphabet, or at least parts of it. He's some sort of genius, actually. He would point at books on my bookshelf and say "K!". And he was right. There was K. When he wailed because his mum or dad had abandoned him with me, I distracted him by pointing at K. He often recovered then. That's K.
Little children require constant interaction. You're unable to think your own thoughts in peace, and until I babysat I had no idea how draining that is. Thinking my own thoughts in peace is probably how I recharge. I´m probably an introvert.

Sometimes Nina would help look after the children. It was actually her who told Kornelis: We could probably watch him a day a week! And then, when my nephew came rolling through the door every

Tuesday, Nina had started a new job and wasn't available anymore. So there I was, alone with a small person in my arms. But if we were watching nephews, indefinite plural, on a weekend or something, Nina would help. She'd carry one kid in a harness, I'd hold the other one's hand, and then we'd go to the Natural History Museum and look at taxidermy. We changed diapers (Nina refused to deal with the poop ones), bottle fed them or gave them bread, and then we watched YouTube videos of excavators and hung out at playgrounds. This exhausted the both of us, and we fell asleep around half seven, right after the news and only half an hour after putting the children to bed. We'd thought we'd have a glass of wine maybe, and stay up talking, but we just had to sleep, and anyway, we were terrified at the thought of the children waking up in the small hours, which they did. It was a real shock to us how little of our normal life we were able to carry out after just one day with children.
It's different when they're your own, said everyone with children.
Why? I asked.
You're kind of more motivated then, they said.

Criminologists talk about *social loss lists* when they talk about inmates. In prison, you usually have a long loss list. You lose personal relations, leisure activities, work, skills, speed, and so on.
Having children would entail a social loss list too, we sensed.
So it's quite hard then, to sit down and say this is it, we're ready to have children, but it's a lot easier if it's been a while since last time you babysat.

Being in a relationship with a woman is great in a lot of ways. What's crummy about it though, is that you can't make a baby with each other.
I really wish we could. Obviously the most important reason is that the baby would be a mix of both of us: it would have Nina's curls and charm, and my hands and mental math skills. But the second most important reason is that we could be spontaneous and ditch all that planning. We could just throw away our birth control and our inhibitions one night we loved each other a little more than usual, and get pregnant mindlessly. And then afterwards we'd say it was an accident, but we think we're gonna keep it. Instead, we have to conceive intentionally, and under particularly aggravating circumstances. And we have to use a donor. It's hard to make a decision like that premeditatedly. At least for the two of us, who think life without children is so fun.

It's not like I walk around with a baby shaped hole in my soul that needs filling. But I think a hole like that might appear in time. So it's probably better to be forward thinking; while there's still blood flowing through my uterus.

6.

I visit my doctor again, this time for a gynaecological exam, and to ask her to refer me to the hospital so Nina and I can make a baby. Everything looks good in there, she tells me first of all, so that's nice.
Isn't it a little difficult for lesbians to have children, though? The doctor says, washing her hands. No, not anymore, you can even do it in Norway now, for like five years actually, you probably should have got that memo, don't you think, I say, except that last bit, I don't say that, I just wish I did.
My doctor then tells me a story that I think I've heard before, so it might actually be an urban myth. The story goes like this: at med school there were two girls, a few years above me, the doctor says, that were a couple. They decided to have a baby and got four boys on their course to donate a cup of sperm each (probably not a *full* cup, my doctor says, sniggering) and then they shook it all up and inseminated one of them. And you know what? They had a baby!
Woah, I've never, I say.
Maybe my doctor is just very sociable, wants a bit of small talk, and since we're on the topic of lesbians and pregnancies, she remembers this story, and it's almost like she experienced it herself isn't it, and it's such a fun story too. Or perhaps it's a veiled suggestion: Why not make things easier, with four guys and a cocktail shaker?

She refers me to a gynaecologist. Nina heard from Charlotte and Maren, lesbians too, that you have to have a gynaecologist in the picture if you want a referral to the hospital for artificial insemination, and since my doctor obviously has no clue, she does what I ask her.

7.

Nina and I attended a viewing a few years back, in Fredensborggate. It was a small studio flat, with light grey walls and a mezzanine. A chandelier hung from the high ceiling in the little apartment. Nina and I had brochures in our hands and our necks bent backwards to look up at the chandelier. Are you buying together? The estate agent asked, late forties, dark grey suit. Yes, I said, and looked at him. Are you friends, or? He replied, a little confused. No, we're a couple, I said. Oh, right, yes of course, no, what people do in the privacy of their own bedrooms is none of my business, that's a personal matter, the estate agent said.

Sample translation by Marjam Idriss.

8.

How are you, I ask; I'm on the phone with mum. It's September, I'm standing in the middle of the living room floor and looking out at the rain falling outside the window. Good, mum says, much better.
After forty minutes of conversation, she has asked if I'm going to work on Monday three times, and tells me, three times over, about a book she's read, from Iran, called *The Book of Fate.* The first and third time it's mentioned she only says she's read it, the second time she recounts the whole plot, which makes it even weirder that she doesn't remember it the third time around. I reply interestedly every time though: really, oh, that's so interesting.

9.

I'm home alone when someone grabs our door handle, violently. Someone's breaking in, I think, this is it! I run to the kitchen, pulse thundering, grab a big knife and return to the front door to look through the peephole.
No one there.
Two minutes later, the door handle is yanked again. I run back to the front door and throw it open, knife in hand! It's Puss-puss, the neighbour cat. Too short to be spotted through the peephole. I'm overcome with relief, and let her in. Come, I'll get you something to eat, I say happily, and Puss-puss follows me to the kitchen. This is of course the last thing I should do – reward her for behaving like a burglar. Nina has said I shouldn't. I'm only supposed to let her in when she comes up the stairs with me.

I kidnap Puss-puss and bring her home with me all the time. I lock the door behind us and feed her. She gets in on her own, I tell Nina. She follows me, and then she bolts through the front door as I open it. I can't stop her, I say. Yeah, but that's because you feed her, Kitty, says Nina, who doesn't like cats. What you're doing just isn't right, she says. She says I need to think about the owner, our neighbour, how she might feel. How she probably worries about where Puss-puss is.
Puss-puss helps me google fertility treatment for lesbians in Norway and to find contact details for the fertility clinic at Oslo University hospital. She settles down on the keyboard, and this helps, emotionally at least.
I scroll through the google hits with two fingers that I can barely move under Puss-puss' belly. Puss clicks on an article from an academic news site dated 2003. Interesting, I think. I used to think 2003 was the future. It sounds so Stone Age at this point. It says that the biotechnology legislation that has just come into effect denies lesbians and singles access to fertility treatment. Sometimes I forget how little time has actually passed since the demographic I belong to suffered state sanctioned discrimination. In the article, a doctor from a private clinic says that it's a shame about the government position on fertility treatment. You can't be prosecuted if you fertilise yourself at home though, he says. Meaning, if you get sperm and inseminate yourself. Like those two women from med school. Not being prosecuted isn't really that much of a comfort, I think.
A doctor from a Red Cross fertility clinic says he supports the government ban entirely. People who choose, actively, not to participate in sexual reproduction or breeding, should stand by their decisions, he says. Adults shouldn't have children to satisfy a personal need. It's not a human right to have children.
A glowing indignation rises in my chest and I roll my eyes at Puss-puss. I imagine the Red Cross doctor sat in his office, peering judgementally at us lesbians and singles over the rims of his glasses, for having *chosen* not to participate in sexual reproduction. Here I am, going around *choosing* to fall in love with women. He's a firm hand. Supports the pedagogy of consequences. If you neglect to follow the rules – sexual reproduction – you'll have to face the consequences. That'll teach you!
What a jerk, I say angrily to Puss-puss.
Puss-puss gets up from the keyboard and stretches. She looks at me, and wanders off to the far corner of the couch. What does she know about children, anyway. I shut my mac and go to the kitchen to make coffee, cursing.

10.

Nina and I are watching a YouTube video. I've watched it once before and searched for it on purpose, because I really liked it.
A young, handsome man in a lovely, light-coloured suit and tie stands up in an American court room. There is a hearing in Iowa, on same-sex marriage. *I'm a sixth generation Iowan and an engineering student at the University of Iowa, and I was raised by two women,* he says.
He talks about what his family does in their spare time. That they go camping and celebrate Christmas, and then he talks about what he has grown up to be, and this is something impressive. *If I were your son, mister chairman¸* he says, *I believe I'd make you proud.*
At this point my eyes gloss over.
My younger sister was born in 1994 and we actually have the same anonymous donor, so that makes us full siblings, which is really cool for me, he says.

I'm touched by this young man. Nina and I each want to carry a child, but not at the same time. I'll go first, since I'm five years older and my veins are pooling faster than Nina's.
We have to get the same donor for my child and yours, I tell Nina. They´re not yours and mine, Nina replies, they're both *our* children. Yes, I say, that's what I meant. The child I'm going to carry and the one you'll carry in a few years. We should use the same donor for both of them. Yeah, I totally agree, says Nina, the best thing would actually be if we could find a donor that's mixed Iranian Norwegian. Then he'd be a bit like both of us.
Yes, I say, the donor should be a kind of go-between. So he shouldn't be too tall. No, but not too short either, Nina says.

11.

When I was six years old, I lay in bed and I felt something tighten around my lungs each time I drew breath. I lay still, Blackie next to me. I see myself there, from above; floating in the ceiling of my childhood bedroom, textured rose wallpaper around me, some of it in rags that the cats enjoyed chasing. I lay on the single bed, my brothers' empty bunk bed lined the other wall. I had my duvet tucked under my chin and I couldn't sleep, because I could feel a stabbing pain in my lungs every time I breathed. I see myself call for mum, she was sat with the TV on in the living room. I didn't call loudly or hysterically, I didn't have enough air for that, but quietly and afraid. I don´t hear myself calling, but from up in the ceiling I can see my mouth move.
Then I see mum sit next to the bed, holding my hand, her expression a little worried. I can sense it, even though I can't see her face. She sat there until I fell asleep.

A few days later we went to see mum's doctor. He sat behind his desk with a serious expression and looked from mum to me. He said something, but not the name of the condition, I don't think he understood what it was, and we never returned to talk about it. My current GP describes it as a kind of muscle cramp between my ribs. Intercostal myalgia, she calls it, and tells me to take vitamin D supplements.

That night in bed was the first of many nights in my life spent calmly thinking I might be dying. But then I learned that the pain would pass, usually within a few hours and that if I tried breathing very carefully, I could get through it avoiding the most intense stabs of pain. It tended to happen in the evenings too, which meant I could go to bed and fall asleep and just wait for it to be gone the next day. While it was happening I would come up with a lot of different theories about what it was that was seriously wrong with me.
As I grew older I wondered if it might be a blood clot in my lungs, a punctured lung perhaps, angina, or even worse, tiny little heart attacks. But when I was little, I thought it was mum's copper coil that had stuck in my lungs.
When mum got pregnant with me, she was on the coil. She had just given birth to Kristoffer – he must have been around seven months when she got pregnant with me. The story goes that she must have bled out the coil without realising. Anyone who has had the coil thinks this part of the story is very odd, mum included, but mum and dad couldn't think of any other explanation. In my head, another theory existed. The coil had been inside her uterus the entire time, I thought, and we had fused, I grew around it, through it, past it. And finally it was wedged inside me, at the centre of my lungs, occasionally making itself known by digging into some soft tissue. Or perhaps it was slowly migrating – the pain did occur in different places in my chest. I imagined it as a coiled up metal trinket, not a tiny crossbow, which I found out much later that it actually is, at 25 when my own doctor in Copenhagen held it up to me in the office.

My friend's mum worked part time when we were little, which meant that she was home a lot and would, amongst other things, spend her free time telling us stories about stuff she had experienced when she was young. For a while she worked at a home for disabled children. One of the children in the home had teeth in their skull. As in, a mouth, and also, from what I gathered, parts of a face. The teeth were part of an embryo, my friend's mum explained, a parasitic twin, an egg that had split and begun their development as two individuals, but then hadn't separated completely and merged instead. One twin had been absorbed by the other's body, and lived only as a set of teeth, and possibly also a kind of screaming face on the other twin's head, hidden by hair, hopefully.
That was also how my mum's coil lived, embedded inside me.

Sometimes I worried that the condition was dangerous. But then the pain would pass and by the next day I'd put it out of my mind. The problem was gone. I moved on with my life, focussed on life and the things that belong to it, rather than death. At night I would pray to God to let me live; swear I would believe in him if he just sorted this out, and then by the next day I couldn't care less. I didn't involve mum in my pain so much anymore. Although I remember the thought crossing my mind, and it crossed my mind a lot when my friends and I started sharing ten-packs of Marlboro lights at thirteen. This isn't good for my lungs, I thought, they aren't that strong. But then I would sit on the grass behind the supermarket on Blystadlia, inhale the cigarette smoke and count, one, two, three, and the further I got, the more I let go of this fear that my lungs couldn't handle it. I practiced blowing smoke rings because that seemed like a goal worth achieving. And that was how I conquered death.

I've actually always been aware of my own mortality. Mum often told me, with feeling and spark, about the time I was three months old and she thought I would die. I've heard the story from dad a few times too, although his version is not as detailed.

Aunt Tine was patient zero. She had a miserable cold at her own birthday party, where dad and Kristoffer were guests. They were patients one and two, and although I probably never realised, I was the third person to be infected.
I was just a baby, and I had got RSV. After a while, my lungs had so much mucus in them that I couldn't drink, and I got increasingly lethargic. Mum took me to the doctor in Fetsund and asked for help, me limp in her arms, but he just poked me with a needle in my foot until I screamed and then concluded that I was fine. Look, she's screaming, he said. According to mum, this scene was repeated two days in a row. On the third day, mum put me in our red little Renault and drove to the Walk-In Centre in Sørumsand to get a second opinion. He threw one glance at me and said: You need to drive her straight to the hospital! I'll call and tell them you're on your way. Mum raced off in the Renault to Akershus University Hospital, with me sleeping ominously in my basket. They put me in an incubator, and there I was, limp and on a feeding tube, for a week, interrupted only by nurses who would lift me up and cuddle me, because I was so cute, mum would usually say, and also because I wasn't as small and fragile as all the other incubator babies, who were of course mostly premature.

This story has a couple of holes: for example, how could I have been three months old when aunt Tine's birthday is five days after mine? Did she wait until January to celebrate? Were we actually celebrating something else in January? Does RSV have a really long incubation period? Or was I genuinely just two weeks old when all of this happened? I talk to mum on the phone again. Someone's lying, I say. Yes, no, but Kristoffer was infected first you know, so it took a little while before you got sick, she says. And you didn't get *that* sick immediately, it started out as a little cold. Yeah, but still, I say. Three months is a just too long. Yes, well, maybe you were two months then, or one even, mum says. I was always dying of something or other, I tell mum accusatorially, like that time I got fever cramps.
When I was two, I had a fever. My fever spiked suddenly, and I started shaking, my little eyes rolling back into my head, and then I was gone. Jan, she's dying! Mum yelled to dad, who was downstairs in the living room on the phone to the Walk-In Centre. But I didn't die. Mum unwrapped me from my blankets, and I came to again.
You can't die of fever cramps, mum tells me on the phone. But it's no wonder you ended up a little fragile, no one even understands how you were conceived. I had the coil! You must have been a tiny little egg that hid in a corner, she says.

12.

My friend Ana and I visit a pal of ours who has had a baby. We tip-toe into a messy apartment, children's toys scattered everywhere.
Hello? We say hesitantly. Glancing at each other.

They knew we were coming, we'd arranged it, but the place looks completely trashed. The kitchen is overflowing with dirty dishes, and the dishwasher isn't even running. There are crumbs and stains on every surface in between all the dirty glasses. The living room is flooded with toys, the vacuum cleaner out on the floor. The one-year old is into vacuuming these days, they tell us, but to be honest, it doesn't really look like that hobby is being put to good use.
It's been exactly one year since I was last there. The little one was a week old at the time, maybe four. Things were in order then. Crumbs stuck on the bread where they belonged, or in the trash. The vacuum cleaner was in the cupboard. The dishwasher was running.
I ask them how the past year has been. My pal's girlfriend looks at me, a kind of warning in her eyes.
It's not like you think it'll be, she says. Oh, how do you mean? I ask, a slight tremble in my voice.
No one visits, my pal's girlfriend says. Really? I ask horrified. No. People who don't have children visit once, but they expect eye contact when you talk to them, you know, and you just can't, she says, you have to keep an eye on the baby. Yes… I say. I do understand, although I'm like that too, I expect eye contact when I talk to people, even if they are all hazy with baby love and sleep deprivation. I feel bad.
And no one calls, she says. Really? Ana says sympathetically, that's rough!
No. But you don't have much else to talk about anyway, the baby takes up so much and that doesn't mean anything to them. I still call my friends, but they don't pick up anymore, says my friend's girlfriend. That's so rough! I say.
Ana and I sit there, our faces sympathetic, and affirm that this all sounds just so rough. My friend also affirms that it has been kind of rough for his girlfriend. He's gotten to go out and go to work, after all.
Yeah, and I haven't really slept either, says the girlfriend, because the baby cries once an hour. I've been losing my mind. Shit, yeah, I can understand that! I say and I really can understand that. I sleep seven-eight hours every night.

The entire time, that warning is there in her eyes. It's better now though, my pal and his girlfriend say. It's easier now. And it was particularly bad for them, because their baby was colicky. Not all babies are like that. Although it's definitely true that your priorities change, my pal says. How? I ask. You're not so hung up on material things anymore. She'll knock stuff over, grab your iPhone and put it in her mouth, she'll make a mess. If you're constantly trying to stop it, you won't have time for anything else, my pal says.

We don't stay for long, Ana and I. We leave and do something childless. We talk, with eye-contact and beer. Once we're safely inside the pub, I feel relief spreading through me and the colour return to my cheeks. God, says Ana and we laugh, nervously.

Two days later I'm with a different couple, friends too. They put their four month old daughter on the dining table while we eat, and she just lies there, calm and content. For at least five minutes she's happy just looking at us. All the while, we adults discuss criminal justice politics, rape and alleged miscarriage

of justice. They have a six year old boy too, this couple, and he sits next to me by the table. He tells me that's a nice sweater I'm wearing, and he's right. It is a nice sweater. Yes, thank you, I smile to the six year old, that's very kind of you to notice. He nods. We listen to music. They have books. They don't have piles of dirty dishes. Their vacuum cleaner isn't out on the floor. They've got something that resembles a life, a life I can envision for myself.
That's what I want, I tell Nina afterwards. Yes, me too, Nina says. When we have a baby, we should bring it to parties and stuff, she says.
Yeah, I'm not sure that's something we can just choose though, I say. Some children loose it at even the smallest sound, and then you probably end up just staying home instead. Sure, but we could still drink wine and listen to music, Nina says. I hope so, I say.